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DERIVATION OF THE NAME POWHATAN

By WILLIAM WALLACE TOOKER

No name, perhaps, is more thoroughly identified with the early annals of the Virginia Colony than that of *Powhatan*, which still survives among the geographic names of the state to designate a county, its seat, a station, and other features, both natural and political.

During several years' research on the Algonquian names recorded on Captain John Smith's map of Virginia, aided by careful study of his writings for any clew or hint that might tend toward the solution of some of the problems presented by them, I became strongly impressed with the idea that the generally accepted etymology and translation given by the late Dr J. H. Trumbull,¹ viz., "*Powhat-hanne*, or *Pau't-hanne*, 'falls in a stream'," and so reiterated in several of his contributions to Algonquian geographic nomenclature, was in error for a number of reasons; but what might be its more probable and acceptable etymology for a long time eluded my best efforts. I am at last fully satisfied that the true meaning of the term has been discovered, as it is so well corroborated by the contemporary facts herein presented.

Indeed, it is these facts that have brought about the discovery, which, like that of Columbus and the egg, is a simple one; yet the facts plainly indicate the error into which Dr Trumbull was led, as they show indisputably that he did not study the main points of the question concerning the exact locality of the Indian town. Dr Trumbull's translation, therefore, must be regarded as a hasty conclusion, which a subsequent revision of the name might have changed, although his etymology is seemingly upheld through the resemblance of *Powhatan* to names of similar orthography, but which are of different etymology and meaning.

¹ *Historical Magazine*, 2nd ser., vol. VII, p. 47, 1870.

Heckewelder's "*Pawat-hanne*, 'the stream of wealth and fruitfulness'," like other of his derivations, is unworthy of consideration.

For a proper understanding of the real origin and etymology of *Powhatan*, we shall quote Smith and his associates in order to show the exact location of the place which bore this name, the true appreciation of the application of the term by the Indians themselves, and its use by Smith and his companions. We cannot doubt that Smith was well aware of the derivation, although he never alluded to it.

In the first place, as Smith¹ informs us, "Their chiefe ruler is called *Powhatan*, and taketh his name of the principall place of dwelling called *Powhatan*. But his proper name is *Wahunsonacock*." This explanation takes away the personal attributes as embodied in a name when bestowed upon an individual, and gives it to a place.

Captain Archer² says: "We came to the second Ilet Described in the Ryver; over against which on *Popham* syde is the habitatyon of the greate kyng *Parwatah*: which I call *Pawatahs Towre*; it is scituat upon a highe Hill by the water syde, a playne betweene it and the water. 12. score [yards] over, whereon he sowes his wheate, beane, peaze, tobacco, pompions, gourdes, Hempe, flaxe, &c. And were any Art vsed to the naturall state of this place, it would be a goodly habitatyon. . . . But now rowing some. 3. myle in shold water we came to an overfall, impassable for boates any further."

Smith further says (page 6): "Giuing vs in a guide to go with vs vp the Riuer to *Powhatan*, of which place their great Emperor taketh his name, where he that they honored for King vsed vs kindly. But to finish this discouerie, we passed on further, where within an ile [a mile] we were intercepted with great craggy stones in the midst of the riuer, where the water falleth so rudely, and with such a violence, as not any boat can possibly passe, and so broad disperseth the streame."

Again, according to Wingfield, Smith says (pages 91-92): "In 6 daies they arrived at a towne called *Powhatan*, consisting of

¹ *History of Virginia*, p. 375.

² *Arber's Smith*, p. xliii.

some 12 houses pleasantly seated on a hill : before it, 3 fertil Iles, about it many of their cornefields. The place is very pleasant, and strong by nature. . . . To this place, the riuer is navigable ; but higher within a mile, by reason of the Rockes and Iles, there is not passage for a smal boate : this they call the Falles."

Mr Edward C. Bruce¹ says : "Smith's brief description is enough in itself amply to identify the locality. The falls are about a mile above ; directly in front are the three islands, though one of them has been reduced by freshets to the humble station of a sand-bar. Of this there can be no mistake, since no other island exists between the falls and the immediate neighborhood of Appomatox, a distance of forty miles. For considerably more than a century, Powhatan, as it is styled, has been in the hands of one family. Taste, time, and wealth have combined to enhance the natural beauty of the spot."

Dr Lyon G. Tyler² says : "A mile below Richmond is a place called Powhatan, long the home of the Mayos, who came from Barbadoes to Virginia."

It will be observed that these quotations are explicit in locating the village of Powhatan on a hill, and in a locality situate about a mile below the falls, a fact that in no event, to an Indian's mind, would induce him to bestow a name connotive of "falls in a river" on a place where it would not be appropriately applied. The Indians were very literal and particular in naming natural features, so that no doubt could arise about the description in another native's mind. Strachey³ gives "*Pagwachowng* (= *paqu-achuan*, 'where the overflow widens or breaks'). The falls at the end of the Kings river," as the true name for the falls. Therefore Trumbull's translation does not harmonize with the actual situation of the town, and on that account must be in error.

Again, the town was situated on a high hill, doubtless a notable landmark some little distance back from the water ; and this fact is confirmed by Smith's map, on which Powhatan is laid down as a "king's residence" with the contour lines of a hill about it, the river a short distance away, and the falls still farther off.

¹ *Loungings in the Footprints of the Pioneers*, Harper's Magazine, May, 1859.

² *Cradle of the Republic*, p. 134.

³ *The Historie of Travaile into Virginia, Britannia*, etc., 1612.

The hill site is also established by the terminal *-atan*, which, in nearly all Algonquian dialects, is a radical element signifying 'to search', or 'to look about', secondarily, 'hill', or 'mountain'; hence this affix should be translated 'hill', for it substantiates, etymologically, the exact location of the town, and no other sounds need be accounted for.

The prefix, *powh-*, *powwh-*, *pough-*, *powah-*, *paw-*, *poh-*, and *pewh-*, as it is variously found in Arber's Smith, does not here refer to *pau't* 'a fall of water' (although it is possible that both are derived from the same root, signifying, 'to make a loud noise'), but is the Virginia equivalent of our adopted word *powwow*, Massachusetts *pauwau*, 'he uses divination', or, as employed by Eliot, 'a witch, wizard, sorcerer'; or by Roger Williams, *powwaw*, 'a priest.' Williams says it was a term applied to the "Priests, their wise men, and old men, they make solemn speeches and orations, or Lectures to them, concerning Religion, Peace or Warre and all things."

Brinton¹ translated the word as 'the dreamer' or 'an interpreter of dreams'. This was simply collateral to a *powwow's* labors, and is not a literal translation of the word. Hariot² says of the conjuror: "The inhabitants give great credit unto their speeche, which often tymes they finde to be all true."

Wood³ says: "Their *pow-wows* betakeing themselves to their exorcismes and necromanticke charmes by which they bring to passe strange things, if we may believe the Indians."

The *Century Dictionary*, under the word *powwow*, as adopted, gives, as a primary meaning, "to perform a ceremony with conjurations for the cure of diseases, or for other purposes"; and as a secondary one, "to hold a meeting—a powwow."

The village was therefore the *Pauwau-atan*, 'the hill of the pauwau,' 'the hill of the sorcerer,' or 'the hill of divination,' where Powhatan, or Wahunsonacock, held his powwows.

Archer⁴ speaks in the following terms of the first English-Indian powwow held there: "Heere we were conducted vp the Hill to the kyng, with whome we found our kinde kyng *Arahatec*: Thes. 2.

¹ *The Lenape and their Legends*, p. 70.

² *Narrative*, 1685.

³ *New England's Prospect*, chap. XII, 1634.

⁴ Smith, p. xlv.

satt by themselves aparte from all the rest (saue one who satt by *Powatah*, and what he was I could not gesse but they told me he was no *Wiroans*): Many of his company satt on either side: and the mattes for vs were layde right over against the kynges."

That Powhatan, the man, was the chief priest, is amply shown by Smith in several instances. He remarks (page 75): "Their principall Temple or place of superstition is at *Vttamussack* at *Pamavnnke*, neare vnto which is a house Temple or place of *Powhatan*." Also (page 376): "A myle from *Orapakes* in a thicket of wood, he hath a house in which he keepeth his kinde of Treasure. . . This house is fiftie or sixtie yards in length, frequented onely by Priests. At the foure corners of this house stand foure Images as Sentinels, one of a Dragon, another a Beare, the third like a Leopard, and the fourth like a giantlike man: all made evill favouredly, according to their best workemanship."

He also remarks (page 81): "It is strange to see with what great feare and adoration all the people doe obay this *Powhatan*."

Thus after nearly three centuries do we learn the true meaning of this well-known Virginian name.